



316. A Brief Study of Herod's Temple

Introduction

Commissioned by King Herod the Great around 19 to 20 BCE, the reconstruction and massive expansion of the Second Temple stands as one of the most remarkable architectural and engineering marvels of the ancient world. It transformed a modest post-exilic shrine into an awe-inspiring, glittering sanctuary complex that dominated the Jerusalem skyline and served as the absolute focal point of Jewish national and spiritual life.

History and Construction

Following his consolidation of power in Judea, Herod initiated the project to appease his Jewish subjects, secure his legacy, and showcase his architectural grandeur to the Roman world.

- **The Scale of Labor:** The project employed 10,000 skilled workers, alongside a specialized workforce of 1,000 priests trained as masons to handle the sacred inner sanctuary where laymen were forbidden to tread.
- **Timeline:** While the main sanctuary was completed in a year and a half, work on the outer courts and surrounding structures continued for decades, well into the mid-1st century CE, fittingly aligning with the statement in the Gospels that the construction took 46 years (and continued past that era). It was ultimately destroyed by the Roman legions in 70 CE.

Architecture and Dimensions

Herod doubled the size of the pre-existing Temple Mount, creating a massive artificial platform spanning approximately 36 acres.



- **Retaining Walls and Substructures:** To form this flat platform on the steep slopes of Mount Moriah, massive retaining walls were built using colossal Jerusalem limestone ashlars, some weighing upwards of 500 to 600 tons.
- **The Royal Stoa:** Situated along the southern edge, this was a magnificent basilica featuring 162 Corinthian columns arranged in four rows, serving as a hub for administrative, judicial, and commercial activities.



- **The Temple Building (The Sanctuary):** Constructed of gleaming white marble and adorned with thick plates of gold, the main sanctuary structure was visible from miles away, appearing from a distance like a snow-covered mountain glittering in the sun. It mirrored the traditional tripartite layout of earlier biblical temples:



- **The Porch (Ulam):** The grand eastern entrance gateway.
- **The Holy Place (Hekal):** Housing the golden menorah, the table of showbread, and the altar of incense.
- **The Holy of Holies (Kodesh Hakodashim):** A completely empty, windowless 20x20 cubit sacred cube representing the earthly dwelling place of the divine presence, separated from the Holy Place not by a solid stone wall as in Solomon's Temple, but by massive, intricately woven curtains.



Parts and Functions

The complex was structured as a series of concentric terraces and courts, progressing from the least sacred to the most holy:

1. **The Court of the Gentiles:** The outermost courtyard accessible to all peoples, foreigners, and proselytes. It was surrounded by magnificent colonnades, but also played host to money changers and merchants.
2. **The Court of the Women:** Separated by a terrace and a stone barrier (the *Soreg*), beyond which Gentiles could not pass under penalty of death. Jewish women participated in worship and community gatherings here.
3. **The Court of the Israelites (Court of the Men):** Reserved for ritually pure Jewish men, where male Israelites brought their sacrificial offerings.
4. **The Court of the Priests:** Containing the massive unhewn stone Altar of Burnt Offering and the bronze Laver, where priests performed daily rituals, grain offerings, and animal sacrifices.

Orientation and Universal Focus

- **Geographic and Architectural Orientation:** True to ancient biblical tradition, the entire complex was aligned along an **east-west axis**. Worshippers entered from the east, facing westward toward the holy sanctuary, directly inverting the pagan practice of facing the rising sun.
- **The Center of the Jewish World:** For Jews scattered across the Mediterranean Diaspora and the wider ancient world—living under Roman, Parthian, or Egyptian rule—Herod's Temple was the singular geographic and spiritual heart of their existence.
- **Universal Focus:** Every synagogue constructed across the globe was architecturally oriented so that the congregation faced directly toward Jerusalem and the Temple. During daily prayers, Sabbath services, and major festivals (Passover, Shavuot, and Sukkot), Jews everywhere directed their petitions toward Mount Moriah, making the Temple the absolute pivot point connecting earth to heaven.

Additional Historical and Symbolic Insights into Herod's Temple

The Operational Mechanics and the Daily Routine

- **The Priesthood and Divisions:** Operation of the Temple required a massive infrastructure. The priesthood was divided into twenty-four courses (*mishmarot*), rotating weekly duties so that thousands of priests, Levites, and singers converged on Jerusalem during festivals and their assigned service windows.
- **The Continuous Flame and Sacrifices:** The outer altar burned continuously, receiving daily morning and evening burnt offerings (*tamid*), alongside thousands of private sin offerings, peace offerings, and thanksgiving tributes brought by everyday pilgrims.
- **The Temple Treasury:** As the economic hub of Judea, the Temple functioned as a national bank, holding vast reserves of coinage, gold tribute, and the mandatory annual Temple tax (*didrachma*) paid by adult Jewish males across the known world.

Architectural Feats and Engineering Ingenuity

- **Robinson's Arch and Barclay's Gate:** To handle the immense flow of human traffic onto the elevated 36-acre platform, massive monumental staircases and towering vaulted entry arches were engineered directly into the exterior retaining walls. Robinson's Arch on the southwest corner supported a massive double-lane monumental stairway leading directly from the lower city markets up to the Royal Stoa.
- **The White and Gold Exterior:** According to historical accounts by Flavius Josephus, the upper parts of the sanctuary were covered in thick plates of gold that reflected the morning sun so blindingly that travelers had to avert their eyes. Where gold was absent, the imported white marble blocks were fitted so precisely that mortar was scarcely visible, giving the appearance from afar of a magnificent snow-capped mountain.

The Ultimate Symbolic Turning Point

- **The Torn Veil:** The tearing of the 4-inch-thick veil from top to bottom at the exact moment of Jesus' death carried profound theological finality. Because it ripped from top to bottom—an impossible feat for human hands standing on the floor—it signaled a divine intervention: God Himself was dismantling the partition between His immediate presence and humanity, ending the Levitical sacrificial system and inaugurating direct spiritual communion through the transformed heart.
- **The Final Destruction:** Fulfilling prophetic warnings, the entire complex was systematically burned, dismantled, and leveled by Roman legions under Titus in 70 CE during the First Jewish-Roman War, leaving behind only the massive western retaining wall—now known as the Western Wall—as a lingering monument to its former architectural glory.

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Sincerely,

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